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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001366

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/HARDING

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PARM SY IS LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: VATICAN SENDING RIGHT MESSAGE, BUT IS ANYONE LISTENING?

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Vatican officials will send visiting Lebanese Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir all the right messages concerning Lebanon's sovereignty and the upcoming presidential election, according to a March 14 contact who just returned from his own trip to the Holy See. It remains to be seen, however, whether the aging Patriarch will actually take the message on board. According to our contact, the Vatican's Lebanon policy is in harmony with the March 14 majority: Lebanon's next president must be chosen without outside (i.e., Syrian or Iranian) interference; Christian MPs must fulfill their duty to be present at the vote; no constitutional amendment should be allowed; and -- if efforts fail to find a credible consensus candidate -- a simple majority is sufficient. Vatican officials are reportedly weighing the possibility of sending an envoy or letter from the Pope in order to reinforce the Vatican's message to the Patriarch directly with Lebanese Christians. End summary.

PATRIARCH'S VISIT OFF TO A BAD START

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¶2. (C) The Ambassador and Pol/Econ Chief met with March 14 stalwart Sheikh Michel Khoury, who had just returned from a visit to Rome and the Vatican, on September 6 to get a readout of his meetings with Vatican foreign minister and friend Archbishop Dominique Mamberti. Khoury, who crossed paths with Patriarch Sfeir on his departure from Rome, said Sfeir was scheduled to meet with Vatican Secretary of State (prime minister equivalent) Tarcisio Bertone and Mamberti on September 6, but not with Pope Benedict XVI, who was at his summer home in Castel Gandolfo and preparing for a trip to Vienna. According to Khoury, the Vatican was quite angry with Sfeir for providing no official notice regarding his visit to Rome (apparently Sfeir had been invited by a humanitarian organization in Rome and had not planned a Vatican stop). Khoury said Vatican officials regretted not firing the Patriarch a year ago and would "kick him out now" for lack of leadership and direction if it weren't for the upcoming presidential election in Lebanon. Removing Sfeir

now would appear to be punishing the Maronite community.

VATICAN ON MESSAGE

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**¶3.** (C) Turning to his own meetings with Vatican officials, Khoury said the Vatican was totally in line with March 14's views. He stressed to Mamberti that whatever the Patriarch does after his visit to Rome will be attributed to the Vatican, including the upcoming Bishops' statement (a sort of Maronite State of the Nation address) and all of the Patriarch's Sunday sermons from now until the presidential election. Mamberti got the message, Khoury said, and promised the Vatican would speak firmly to Sfeir.

**¶4.** (C) The good news, Khoury said, is the Vatican will send the Patriarch all the right messages, i.e., on Lebanese sovereignty, the need for all Christian MPs to be present for the vote on the president, the dangers of outside (especially Syrian and Iranian) interference, especially for Lebanon's Christians, and therefore the need to avoid a compromise candidate that would be to Syria's advantage and lead to an irreversible loss of support from the US and France.

BUT WILL THE PATRIARCH GET IT?

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**¶5.** (C) The bad news is that it is unlikely the Patriarch will listen, Khoury added, noting that Sfeir is unduly influenced by those around him, including (in reference to pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud and Hezbollah-allied MP Michel Aoun) the "two Lahoud spies and two Aounie clerics" that accompanied him to Rome, and that he seems to be "losing his balance" mentally. Khoury said he asked the Vatican to support and contain Sfeir; Mamberti replied that the Vatican would certainly support him but could not contain him -- they didn't even know what he wants anymore, Mamberti reportedly

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complained.

VATICAN EYEING CANDIDATES

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**¶6.** (C) Khoury dismissed the possibility of Vatican support for several of Lebanon's would-be presidential candidates currently seeking Vatican appointments, including Jean Obeid and Joseph Torbey (despite Torbey's status as President of the Maronite League, Khoury said Mamberti "knows his true colors."). Khoury said he told Mamberti the choice of president must be based on principles, not names. Furthermore, the Patriarch should aim for top-notch candidates first, rather than starting with mediocre officials like former Ambassador to the US Simon Karam, who Khoury argued is not up to the task. Khoury said he told Mamberti that Nassib Lahoud is by far the best candidate, an assessment shared privately by the Patriarch, and that the Vatican should work with Sfeir to develop a "methodology" to get him elected. If that proves impossible, then the Vatican should make an effort to work for the next best candidate; otherwise, Khoury warned, the Vatican would be forced to capitulate to an undesirable candidate. Mamberti reportedly took note but did not comment.

OPPOSED TO CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT,  
BUT SUPPORTIVE OF SIMPLE MAJORITY VOTE

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**¶7.** (C) Khoury said the Vatican is strongly opposed to amending the constitution, effectively ruling out the possibility of Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman's candidacy, as well as that of Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh (whom Khoury believes is close to Syria). Furthermore, he claimed, if efforts to find a genuine consensus candidate fail, the Vatican would approve a president elected by simple majority. He opined that Syria

and Iran also would accept a simple majority vote, albeit reluctantly, and would not do anything "illegal" -- though they would do everything possible to make it difficult for the new president to rule afterwards.

ADAMANTLY ANTI-AOUN

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¶ 8. (C) Khoury claimed the Vatican does not like Free Patriotic Movement leader (and eternal presidential hopeful) General Michel Aoun at all. Bertone and Mamberti reportedly told him Aoun's behavior is making it impossible for Lebanon's Christian children to live. Khoury said no one at the Vatican would see Aoun (who is currently in Rome), but that the Nuncio in Lebanon would deliver the Vatican's message separately to each Aoun MP.

WEIGHING BENEFITS OF SENDING ENVOY

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¶ 9. (C) Khoury said the Vatican was hesitating about sending an envoy to Lebanon, relying on the Nuncio for now to transmit its message. Mamberti himself was willing to come but feared it would give the impression that there are differences between the Vatican and the Patriarch. The Ambassador, noting that the Patriarch's appeals to Christians in the Metn district to go to the polls during the August 5 by-election went unheeded, argued that the Vatican could reinforce, not contradict, the Patriarch's message about the necessity of MPs showing up to vote, through an envoy, which would be especially useful in pressuring Aoun's supporters. Khoury said another possibility was a letter from Pope Benedict XVI, though the Pope, more of a theologian than politician, was reluctant to do so given that his Christmas letter to the region's Christians was largely ignored. Better yet, the Ambassador responded, have the envoy deliver a letter from the Pope addressed specifically to Lebanon's Christians. It's harder to ignore the Patriarch when he's backed by the Vatican, he said.

COMMENT

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¶ 10. (C) As Khoury himself put it, the good news is the Vatican will tell the Patriarch what we want him to hear.

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The bad news is that, based on the Patriarch's recent flip-flopping on issues like the constitutional amendment, the two vs. six-year presidential term, and a military general as head of state, even if the message sinks in, it may not survive the trip home to Bkirki, the official residence of the Patriarch. And with plenty of other voices swarming around with other opinions, it is no wonder the 87-year old Patriarch's head is spinning. We strongly support the idea of a Vatican follow-up in Lebanon, if nothing else to shame Aoun's followers into opposing a pro-Syrian president.

FELTMAN